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NOTES

THE CONVENTION OF THE SOCIALIST PARTY

Just about what socialism really is in this country and what it is likely to become in the near future were pretty definitely indicated by the National Party Convention which met in Chicago in May.

The most significant thing about this convention was perhaps its composition. It was distinctly not a homogeneous body of working men in the usual meaning of that term. In fact, the actual mechanical wage workers present as delegates were comparatively few in number. In their stead farmers, lawyers, editors, small enterprisers, politicians, professional organizers, professional agitators, and ministers and ex-ministers of the gospel bulked large on the convention floor and were loud in the convention proceedings.

This startling heterogeneity of representation is partly to be accounted for, of course, by the comparative poverty of the actual wage workers in the party and the difficulties which they naturally meet with in quitting work for propagandistic purposes. But it means, I take it, very much more than this. It indicates the fact that, taking things as they actually are, socialism in this country at the present time is by no means correctly represented as a mere movement of the working class and that it is neither to be understood nor judged by the mere study of Marxian or any other socialist philosophy. It means particularly that while socialism has a solid basis in working-class membership, it is, like most new movements resting to any considerable degree on sentiment, a loadstone for the most diverse elements in society; that it has drawn to itself, along with intelligent and constructive middle-class leaders, a generous quota of cranks, mystics, and mere agitators. This to a large degree helps not only to interpret the convention proceedings but to forecast as well the immediate future of the party's history.

The convention proceedings reduced to lowest terms were an eight-day contest for control of the party policy and machinery between a comparatively small group of very intelligent, skilful, moderate, and constructive leaders, drawn to a large extent from the middle class, and an unorganized, impulsive, comparatively

unintelligent, sentimental, for the most part negative, and in part revolutionary mass, drawn from all classes and actually representing none. In this contest the constructive element won out at almost every point, but it did so only by uniting passionate eloquence with great adroitness in the wording, postponement, and compromise of issues, by the exercise of self-control in the face of much insinuation and abuse, and by making the strongest professions of loyalty to the principle of the revolutionary class struggle.

It was recognized by the party leaders that socialism can develop little strength in this country unless it can draw its support largely from union membership. To meet this situation a declaration was required that could be supported both by the revolutionary and constructive or practical socialists, that would satisfy the industrial unionists in and out of the party and that would at the same time convince the trade-unionists that the socialist party is capable of securing for the worker immediate amelioration of his condition and amelioration without interference with the direct policy and methods of unionism or with craft autonomy.

The situation was a difficult one. It was met in a way after stormy debate, in which the attempt was made by the impossibilist or revolutionary element to force the convention into a fatal declaration in favor of industrial as against trade-unionism. The resolution as finally adopted was addressed significantly to "organized labor." It recognized the "natural," "necessary," and "educative" character of the non-political labor movement and its "necessary" autonomy. But at the same time it called upon "all organized working men to remember that they still have the ballot in their hands, . . . to realize that the intelligent use of political power is absolutely necessary to save their organization from destruction, and to rally to the support of the party of their class."

Looked at from the standpoint of ultimate party policy and control, the adoption of this resolution represented a distinct and significant victory for the constructive element. From the standpoint of immediate success, however, the victory was in all probability a barren one. The sponsors of the resolution could not prevent an acrimonious debate upon it which called attention to the existence of a strong impossibilist and anti-trade-unionist faction in the party. Nor could they prevent Bill Haywood from presiding at the ratification rally held shortly after and there making a bitter attack upon the leaders of the American Federation of Labor. But

these incidents apart, the immediate practical effect of such a resolution is distinctly problematical. Trade-unionism does not take seriously from the socialist party mere general assurance of appreciation and co-operation. Its officers and members want to be shown that *immediate* advantage will result to *them* before they take serious steps looking toward any alliance with the socialists.

No better success attended the efforts of the constructive element to convince the farmer that his interests lie in the direction of alliance with the socialist party. The majority of the committee appointed to report a farmers' programme hoped to gain favor with the agricultural element by distinguishing between the capitalist landowner and the small farmer, by convincing the latter of his proletarian character, and by denying the intention of the socialist party to expropriate him. These good intentions were foiled by the revolutionary element, singularly enough supported largely by the agricultural delegates. The carefully constructed majority report was displaced by a revolutionary declaration promising the small farmer "protection through the socialization of national industries," but recommending him to study socialism and insisting "that any attempt to pledge the farmers anything but the complete socialization of the industries of the nation to be unsocialistic."

The skill of the party leaders was specially displayed in connection with the problem of immigration. In dealing with this matter delicate manipulation was required in order to reconcile the revolutionary and practical factions. The Marxian slogan, "proletarians of all nations unite," and the central socialistic conception of the class struggle seemed to stand definitely in the way of a restrictive declaration. But it was equally evident that adherence to doctrinaire principles at this point would ill mate with declarations assuring the American worker, especially of the Pacific Coast, that the socialist party stands opposed to his further exploitation and for the immediate practical amelioration of his condition.

In this dilemma the convention supported its committee in a resolution which goes a long way toward banishing all doubts as to the practical astuteness of the political labor leaders. This resolution, after affirming the class struggle to be the fundamental principle of socialism, deftly clothed the immigration issue in the habiliments of a problem of capitalist aggression; boldly upheld the right of the worker to protect himself against injury from such aggression in the guise of immigration; then as deftly dodged the

whole issue by declaring that the position thus taken does not "commit the socialist party to any attitude upon specific legislation looking to the exclusion of any race or races as such," and by proposing a special committee to "carefully study and investigate the whole subject of immigration in all its aspects, racial no less than economic, to publish from time to time such data as they may gather, and to report to the next convention of the party."

The discussions of unionism, farming, and immigration were brought forward deliberately because of the acknowledged need of a party programme in regard to these questions. It was quite otherwise with the fourth important matter of principle with which the convention grappled. For some time party workers have carried on a propaganda which has brought into the membership a large body of so-called Christian socialists. The continued success of this propaganda seemed to depend largely on the avoidance of an open conflict between the Christian and the atheistic elements of the party, in which the champions of the materialistic philosophy would be sure to disturb the mystical serenity of those who had found it possible to look upon socialism as a mere striving for that co-operative commonwealth dimly shadowed forth in the altruism of religious teaching.

The contest, however, was not to be avoided. It was sprung upon the convention as might have been predicted by the injudicious remarks of an overzealous atheist. The contest thus precipitated was for the time being compromised by a declaration that "the socialist movement is primarily an economic and political movement and that it is not concerned with religious belief." But before a truce had been thus established the debate had gone far enough to indicate rather clearly that, whether the materialistic conception of history is or is not capable of being reconciled with Christian doctrine, the fact is, that the conditions which lead to a thoroughgoing adherence to Marxian socialist theory do breed atheism—in other words, that atheism is a definite enough tenet of working-class philosophy and that on this account the so-called Christian socialist faction may be surely counted upon to vex the socialist movement in the future with an element impossible of real assimilation.

In the disposition of the foregoing matters the success of the constructive group over the revolutionary element was at least equivocal. In one respect, however, the so-called opportunists did score an important victory in relation to the party policy. What

was wanting in the specific resolutions adopted, in the way of assurance of immediate practical effort along the line of assumed working-class interest, was to a very large extent included in the party platform. With comparatively slight opposition the revolutionary element allowed the insertion in this document of a significant programme of immediate demands. Under the headings "General," "Industrial," and "Political" were skilfully arranged a series of planks covering specifically the demands upon which the various labor-class organizations and groups of the country can be said to be practically united. Considered apart from the specific proceedings of the convention in regard to the problems of unionism, landownership, immigration, and religion, this practical programme would indicate, as the party leaders are inclined to claim, a great advance in the practical significance of the party. Taken together with these specific proceedings, this claim seems somewhat extravagant.

The fact is that the immediate future of the socialist party depends more on the character of the party personnel and the party machinery than on mere declarations of policy. Before the socialist party can become a potent political force in this country, two things are necessary. It must be purified by the elimination of certain elements which breed only dissension within and distrust without; its machinery must be so modified as to give effective executive control of the various party organs and functions. These facts are clearly understood by the leaders of what we have called the constructive element of the party and in the convention they made some headway in this direction.

In the matter of personnel, the future of the party is threatened most seriously by a certain ignorant, doctrinaire, ultra-revolutionary, semi-anarchistic element represented by such men as Bill Haywood and certain individuals connected with such sheets as the *Appeal to Reason*. Where political anarchism cannot set itself up as an independent party, these men and their like fasten themselves like leeches upon the most revolutionary party existing and, by the power which extravagant appeal to class consciousness has upon the minds of the rank and file, they make themselves popular heroes, force the real party leaders unwillingly to support their outrageous and destructive actions, and damn the party in the minds of reasonably conservative men by assuming to act as its mouthpieces and spokesmen.

In the campaign for the subordination of this element and the ultimate purification of the party, three important advances were made by the constructive element in the convention. First, Haywood was forced by this element to withdraw from the contest for political leadership during the present campaign. Considering that Haywood was still in the eyes of the rank and file a martyr to the sacred cause of labor, this was a tremendous gain for the constructive section of the party. The feat was accomplished by the exercise of both strategy and force. The strategy was shown in allowing Haywood as an assumed candidate for nomination to bellow about the country weeks and even months before the convention. In this way, it was hoped that he would politically hang himself. And he did so weaken his hold upon the minds and hearts of the sane socialist constituency that before the day for nomination came, a caucus of conservative delegates was able to force his "voluntary" withdrawal and thus to save the leaders from the choice between disruption of the party and suicidal acquiescence.

With the side-tracking of Haywood, however, the power of the constructive forces in the convention was exhausted, so far as concerned the determination of campaign leadership. They could not nominate a man of their own stripe but were forced to choose between popular idols. But neither could they find in the convention a real working-class leader of suitable caliber. Thus Debs and Hanford were chosen again to lead in the campaign, though it was clearly understood that Debs has no longer mind nor character for leadership and that neither of the candidates really represents the dominant trend in the party policy.

Secondly, looking toward party purification, a clause was inserted in the constitution declaring that any party member shall be expelled who does not subscribe to political action. This clause was inserted to be used in the future as a club against men like Haywood who advocate and indulge in "direct action," that is to say, in strikes and violence as substitutes for political agitation in the interests of the working class.

Thirdly, the convention by a large majority voted down a proposition to take steps looking toward a union with the Socialist Labor Party. The meaning of this action is clear when it is understood that the Socialist Labor Party represents traditionally the ultra-revolutionary, impossibilist standpoint and that it is led by a man who, if he does not represent theoretical anarchy, has for two

decades stood for the alternative between organic party anarchy and one-man power.

But mere declaration of policy and purification of the membership are not alone sufficient to insure for the socialist party rapid growth in numbers and power. For this growth there is needed a pretty complete reorganization of the party machinery. There is too much democracy and untrammelled individualism in the party organization, considering the elements of which it is composed. This also is recognized by the constructive party leaders and in at least one especially important matter they presented the choice to the convention between democratic ideals coupled with inefficiency and efficiency through centralized authority.

It is of considerable significance that the convention pronounced in favor of efficiency. It adopted a constitutional amendment allowing the national committee of the party to elect the national executive committee instead of requiring this committee to be elected by party referendum. By this action not only an efficient party executive was secured but a noteworthy step was taken in the direction of eliminating generally the cumbrous tyranny of the rank and file which has heretofore put a brake upon the party machinery. The advance, however, was not definitely assured, since the action of the convention still must be referred to the rank and file of the party for approval.

In a general way, quite apart from its specific actions, this convention revealed many important characteristics of socialism and suggested many significant conclusions in regard to it. The careful observer could not fail to be convinced, for example, that though socialism is in this country not a mere movement *of* workers, still, as represented thus, it is a movement definitely based on the conception of class struggle and is essentially a conscious, organized struggle *for* the social domination of the working class. It seems to mean in short an attempt to reconstruct the political and legal fabric in the interests of this class. He who works for this end is a socialist, let him base his action on theory of any sort whatever, on sentiment, or on self-interest. Thus socialism as it actually presents itself to us here and now is a strange mixture of elements—utopian, Christian, scientific—men coming to it by all modes of thought and sentiment—the one common bond being struggle for working-class political supremacy.

It was equally evident that in this struggle here and now, as

the case has been abroad and historically, the leaders are drawn largely from the middle class. The leader of leaders in the American Socialist Party today is Victor L. Berger, a successful newspaper editor. In authority below him stand such leaders as John Spargo, an English ex-nonconformist minister and a facile writer; Morris Hillquit, a successful New York lawyer and author; A. M. Simons, and May Wood-Simons, graduates of the University of Wisconsin; W. R. Gaylord, and Carl D. Thompson, educated as ministers, the latter a one-time student of the University of Chicago; Robert Hunter, the New York millionaire; Mrs. Ida Crouch Hazlett, a former Illinois school teacher; Seymour Stedman, a Chicago lawyer, and many others of distinctly middle-class extraction or present middle-class occupation and status.

The effect of this middle-class leadership on the outcome of the socialist movement is a problem brought forcibly to mind by the convention proceedings. It is notable that it was these middle-class leaders and their followers who constituted in the convention what we have called the constructive and moderate element. This faction wants practical reform, immediate results, party efficiency. When they are not forced to it by their revolutionary opponents, they are not inclined to say much about the social revolution. To most of them, Marx is indeed an authority but not a god. There is no doubt that the leadership of these men tends to make of the socialist party a mere party of radical reform. If men of this type succeed in making strong and permanent their present precarious hold on the party authority and machinery, it is at least doubtful whether the organization will ever go the full route to social revolution.

Not without significance in this connection is the nationality of the men and women now prominent in the party organization and work. The convention itself did not present the appearance of a body of foreigners, and when one came to the organizers and state secretaries and to the national Executive Committee, it was quite evident that the time has come to lay aside the good old notion that socialism can gain no foothold among Americans. There is nothing foreign about such men as Simons, Thompson, Work, Stokes, and Barnes, who sit about the table in the national Executive Committee meetings of the party. Nor are Gaylord, Thomas, Lee, Hunter, Hanford, Hunt, Carr, Lewis, Morgan, Stedman, Carey, Hazlett, Graham, and Slayton, delegates prominent on the

floor of the convention, to be deprived of good standing in the company of Anglo-Saxons. Indeed, of the two hundred and two delegates, listed in the *Daily Socialist* of May 12, no fewer than one hundred and sixteen bear distinctively American names unless indeed the Irish are to be counted out.

On the whole, close observation of the socialist party at work does not weaken the conviction that here is a force destined to play an important part in the development of American polity. But such observation does cause one to hesitate about hazarding the prediction that the party is likely to increase rapidly in strength in the near future. Recruits to the socialist party are most likely to come in large numbers from the ranks of organized labor but it will take some time to convince the trade-unionists of the futility of the American Federation's political programme and to rouse them to real consciousness of the need on their part of united political action. Even then it is far from certain that the unionists will join forces with the socialists rather than attempt to gain their ends through an independent labor party. On the other hand, before the socialist party can hope to appeal successfully to any great body of men outside the ranks of organized labor, it must purge itself of certain vicious and disorganizing elements, must confirm the leadership of the intellectual and moderate element, must reconcile democracy and efficiency in the party machinery, and must have a programme that is unequivocal, relatively complete, and really practical. To accomplish these things will take time, and when they have been accomplished the question is, will the socialist party really be a party of socialists?

ROBERT F. HOXIE

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

WASHINGTON NOTES

CONGRESSIONAL APPROPRIATIONS

ADOPTION OF THE CURRENCY ACT

THE NEW CURRENCY ISSUES

ORGANIZING NATIONAL CURRENCY ASSOCIATIONS

IMPORT AND EXPORT FREIGHT TARIFFS

"EMPLOYERS' LIABILITY" OF THE GOVERNMENT

A Correction

Congressional appropriations, for the fiscal year about to open, are by far the largest yet recorded and are in many instances based